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THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION: MYTHOLOGY AND HISTORY

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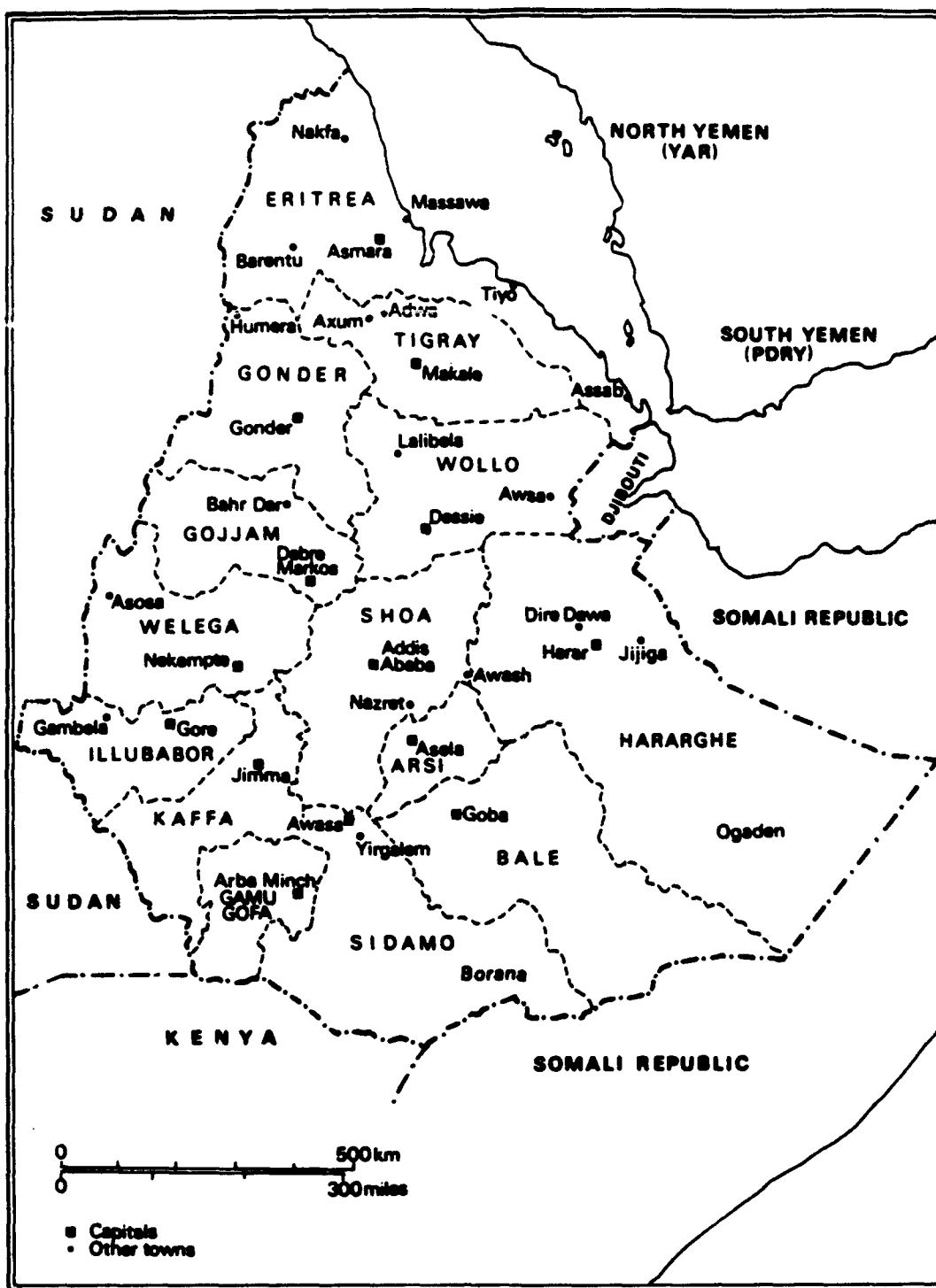
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ETHIOPIA

THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION: MYTHOLOGY AND HISTORY¹

Paul B. Henze

INTRODUCTION

Even before the dramatic events of mid-May 1989, it was difficult to envision a sequence of actions by which the Derg (junta), which transformed itself into the Workers' Party of Ethiopia (WPE) in 1984 and formalized its rule by establishing the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (PDRE) in 1986, could escape the consequences of chronic economic failure and successive military defeats in the north in 1988 and 1989. A massive Soviet/Cuban intervention of the kind which rescued President Haile-Mariam Mengistu in 1977-1978 is inconceivable now. So is a military resolution of the insurgencies in Eritrea, Tigre, and adjacent insurgent-contested regions to the south. Can a leader who has failed in his self-declared highest priority--preservation of the country's territorial integrity--and who has had to destroy much of his military officer corps to retain his power continue to command the authority and respect necessary to retain control of the country's destiny? His prospects seem poor.

It is impossible to forecast the course and tempo of the transformations that Ethiopia must experience in the months and years ahead. Following the mid-May 1989 coup attempt, the situation is confused and likely to remain so for some time. We must hope that the Ethiopian people will not again have to pay as heavy a price in blood and suffering as they did during the years immediately after 1974.

The purpose of this essay is not to speculate on potential outcomes of the continuing crisis, but to look back over the past 15 years and review the Ethiopian revolutionary experience for its relevance to the country's future prospects.

¹This paper was originally presented at the Fifth Michigan State University Conference of Northeast African Studies, "Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa," April 27-29, 1989. The original draft has been expanded with the addition of further footnotes and brief reference to the events of mid-May 1989 in Ethiopia.

Much has been written about the Ethiopian Revolution, more by foreigners than by Ethiopians, but a good deal of the interpretive writing on the causes of the Revolution, its course, and the crises it has generated, is deficient. There are enormous gaps in what is known about revolutionary events and subsequent developments. In the absence of hard information, a great deal of mythology has developed about events in Ethiopia since 1974. Some of the myths are Derg concoctions. Some are rationalizations of their foreign supporters. Some have been spread by opponents of the regime. Ill-informed Western idealists, overly eager to criticize the United States, figure prominently among the mythologizers. In this essay I take up, one by one, a dozen of the most popular and pervasive myths. There are others, but those I discuss below seem to me most important from the viewpoint of their possible relevance to Ethiopia's future.

Myth No. 1: The oppressiveness of Haile Selassie's feudal regime made the violence of the Revolution inevitable.

During the first years of the Revolution, the old Lion of Judah was denounced by the Derg for every kind of dictatorial depravity and was alleged to have siphoned off vast wealth and deposited it in foreign bank accounts. Though no firm evidence of diversion of even modest sums of money has come to light, the allegation continues to be repeated. Ryszard Kapuscinski's portrayal of the Emperor as a greedy tyrant² has not only been translated into many languages and recently issued in paperback but was even turned into a stage play. It is difficult to regard this book as anything but a combination of fabrication and gossip.³ Tens of thousands of Ethiopians and foreigners were closely

²Ryszard Kapuscinski, *The Emperor, Downfall of an Autocrat*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1983. Written and originally copyrighted in 1978, the book attracted no attention until it was translated from Polish and published in English.

³See, e.g., Richard Pankhurst's letter to the *Times Literary Supplement*, April 17, 1987.

associated with Haile Selassie during his long life. A comprehensive portrait of his character, his strengths, and his failings confronts the serious historian with no insurmountable problems, as the three-volume biography which Harold Marcus is now completing demonstrates.⁴ The myth of Haile Selassie's depravity may seem to excuse the violence and incompetence of the Derg, but contributes nothing to explain the causes and course of the Revolution.

The question of feudalism in Ethiopia is a tortured issue. In post-revolutionary writing, the term has been used as a general epithet. As an analytical concept it is valueless.⁵

Myth No. 2: Economic stagnation during the late imperial period and social contradictions generated by incipient capitalism left revolutionary leaders no choice for accelerated development but Marxism-Leninism.

Extensive statistical data do not support the contention that the late imperial period was economically stagnant. Comparable levels of growth have never been attained since the Revolution.⁶ While there can be little doubt that impatience for modernization among the urban elite and rising expectations among broader segments of the population generated support for change, enthusiasm for a sharp turn toward Marxism-Leninism was extremely limited. Marxism-Leninism had no meaning for what Mengistu likes to call "the broad masses." Many alternatives for accelerated economic development existed, and sizable numbers of Ethiopian technocrats and intellectuals were well aware of them.

⁴The first volume, *Haile Selassie, the Formative Years*, appeared in early 1988, published by the University of California Press.

⁵See, e.g., Gene Ellis, "The Feudal Paradigm as a Hindrance to Understanding Ethiopia," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, No. 14, 1976, pp. 275-295.

⁶See Paul B. Henze, "The Economic Development of Kenya and Ethiopia, 1950-74, an Essay in Comparison," in Tadesse Beyene (ed.), *Proceedings of the 8th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa, November 26-30, 1984, ELM Publications, Huntingdon, Cambs, England, 1988; Paul B. Henze, *Contrasts in African Development: The Economies of Kenya and Ethiopia, 1975-1984*, The RAND Corporation, N-2868-USDP, April 1989; Paul B. Henze, *Ethiopia's Economic Prospects for the 1990s*, The RAND Corporation, N-2857-USDP, February 1989.

The primary appeal of Marxism-Leninism to Mengistu and his group appears to have been as a formula for consolidating a hold on political power without permitting any real test of popular will either through elections or consultative procedures. Nevertheless, some supporters of the Revolution undoubtedly believed--or became convinced--that Marxism-Leninism and generous aid from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (and perhaps China) would result in rapid economic development. In actuality the Derg chose to imitate a system which was already degenerating into stagnation, as both Western and Eastern European critics were arguing at the time,⁷ and as Gorbachev has made dramatically clear since he instituted *glasnost* and *perestroika*. Naive military officers and Marxist intellectuals inexperienced in the practicalities of leadership and governing, as well as economics, can perhaps be excused for these misjudgments, but it is difficult to rationalize their persistence in applying Marxism-Leninism in the face of its obvious failures and the disavowal of it in various degrees in China, Eastern Europe, and now in the USSR itself. Expectations of substantial Soviet economic generosity were always based on wishful

Haile Selassie is still an unperson in the PDRE. Discussion of his leadership in anything other than ritualistically negative terms is officially taboo. On my most recent visit to Ethiopia (February-March 1989), however, I was struck at how often recollections of Haile Selassie came up in private conversations with people at many levels of society. More often than not, comments referred to positive aspects of the Emperor's style and personality: his skill in overcoming ethnic and tribal differences and persuading Ethiopians to work together, his flexibility in applying varied techniques of governing to different regions, his lack of vindictiveness toward opposition, his economic pragmatism, his respect for religion, his talents for diplomacy, and his

⁷See Jan Winiecki, *The Distorted World of Soviet-type Economies*, Routledge & Kegan Paul and Pittsburgh University Press, London/Pittsburgh, 1988, with its extensive bibliography and references. See also F. A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, University of Chicago Press, 1988.

high international prestige. Such observations were never coupled with expressions of longing for restoration of the monarchy as an institution, but they were invariably made to the comparative detriment of President Mengistu Haile-Mariam, whose style of governing has been imperious but devoid of the civilized and humane characteristics of his predecessor.

Post-Mengistu revolutionary Ethiopia will need to base its approach to the future on a more honest and open-minded appraisal of the positive and negative features of Haile Selassie's long modernizing reign than the present Marxist-Leninist leadership has been able to make.

Myth No. 3: Both the cause and the source of the momentum of the Ethiopian Revolution were an upwelling of mass peasant discontent.

This myth is a concoction *inter alia* of Fred Halliday and Maxine Molyneux, nonspecialists on Ethiopia, whose book⁸ provides the most sophisticated, plausible, and charitable set of justifications available of the Derg's positions and Soviet actions toward Ethiopia--far more skillful than anything produced by a Soviet author.⁹ No serious Ethiopian or Western scholar knowledgeable of conditions in the Ethiopian countryside in 1974 has provided substantiation for this myth. A more convincing case can be made that the Derg rushed to nationalize land and mounted the *zemecha* which followed to establish peasant associations because the revolution it wished to carry out lacked--and needed--a mass base. Today the cumulative experience of warfare in the north, famine, favoritism toward state farms, coercive villagization and resettlement, governmental exploitation through forced delivery quotas, and restrictions on movement of persons and goods appears to have alienated most of the peasantry, whatever their initial attitude toward the Revolution might have been.

⁸*The Ethiopian Revolution*, Verso, London, 1981.

⁹I reviewed this and a number of other related books in a review article, "History and the Horn," *Problems of Communism*, January-February 1983.

The Derg never found a mass base. The WPE, when finally formed, was (and remains) an agglomeration of co-opted military officers, officials, and opportunists. Peasants and workers have almost no voice in it.

Myth No. 4: There is no evidence of Soviet involvement in, or encouragement of, the Ethiopian Revolution.

Much of what happened in 1974 and why remains a mystery. A military committee which claimed to embody the people's will did not reveal its membership or explain its method of operation. Repeated bloody clashes which resulted in continual attrition of the Derg have never been fully clarified. To this day governmental processes at the highest level in Ethiopia are conspiratorial and unfathomable both to the public and to outside observers.

Absence of hard evidence of Soviet involvement in early revolutionary events and subsequent PMGSE/PDRE operations is not acceptable as proof of Soviet noninvolvement in light of what is known from study of 70 years of Soviet clandestine and subversive operations in all parts of the world. There is evidence of direct East European contacts with some revolutionary elements during the summer of 1974. East Europeans would at that time have had no motivation for acting independently of, or contrary to, Soviet desires.

Russian interest in gaining a foothold in the Horn from the mid-nineteenth century onward is well documented. Soviet desires to play a role in the Horn are attested by Soviet actions during and immediately after the end of World War II, when the USSR attempted unsuccessfully to participate in future arrangements for all former Italian colonies, especially Eritrea. There is extensive circumstantial and some firm evidence of Soviet efforts to lay the groundwork for future destabilization of Ethiopia during the next 25 years.¹⁰ Both Eritrean

¹⁰I examined much of it in "Getting a Grip on the Horn" in Walter Z. Laqueur (ed.), *The Pattern of Soviet Conduct in the Third World*, Praeger, New York, 1983.

rebels and Mengistu have in recent years acknowledged Soviet benevolence toward the Eritrean insurgency from the mid-1960s onward. Cuba (along with Communist China, also an important source of support for Eritrean insurgency until its policy change in 1971) has never disavowed it and, in fact, in a rare demonstration of adherence to principle, has since 1977 consistently refrained from extensive direct support of Derg military operations in Eritrea.

The subject of the Soviet involvement in the Ethiopian Revolution requires much more serious study than it has received (or perhaps can yet be given) and must remain open. It is to be hoped that among the enormous number of blank spots in past Soviet history that are gradually being filled in since Gorbachev came to power, new light may be shed on questions of Soviet policy and actions in Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia. The subject has attracted remarkably little serious Western academic interest, though a recent doctoral dissertation in the process of publication in England includes a systematic analysis of Soviet public statements and actions toward both Ethiopia and Somalia during the 1970s.¹¹

Myth No. 5: The Soviet Union stage-managed the Ethiopian Revolution from start to finish as a deliberate challenge to the United States.

This myth is, of course, the mirror image of the preceding one. It was a favorite of strongly anticommunist journalists and publicists and gained credence among some government officials in the United States and abroad during the late 1970s. It has been reflected in the thinking of some Ethiopians as well as in the writing of some academics. Its acceptance was facilitated by a hitherto popular and persistent myth about the Soviet Union itself: **Kremlin policies and actions are invariably meticulously planned as part of a master scheme for achieving world domination and consistently carried out with all elements of the Soviet power structure smoothly coordinated.**

¹¹Robert G. Patman, *Intervention and Disengagement in the Horn of Africa--the Soviet Experience 1970-78*, PhD dissertation, University of Exeter, 1988; scheduled for publication by Cambridge University Press.

The Soviet system has been so secretive that we know little about policy processes within it and have only a few insights from defectors about how Soviet missions abroad actually operate. *Glasnost* has not yet shed much light on these matters.

As far as Ethiopia and other countries of the Horn are concerned, Soviet scholarship and journalism have been remarkably uninformative. Soviet scholars dealing with the area have produced little except *ex post facto* rationalizations for Kremlin policies and actions, and routine Marxist praise for PMGSE/PDRE policies, actions, and intentions. It would be naive to assume that this means that Soviet activities in the Horn have led to no argumentation or disagreement in Moscow (or in Soviet embassies in Addis Ababa, Mogadishu, and elsewhere). During Gorbachev's first year, in the wake of the Great Famine in Ethiopia, the Soviet GOSPLAN advisory group in Addis Ababa produced an extensive critique of the PMGSE's economic performance.¹² This and a few recent statements¹³ are the best hard evidence we have of Soviet dissatisfaction with Mengistu's leadership and WPE policies and performance. It is easy to understand how Soviet criticism of the regime's performance in both the military and economic spheres, rational as it may be, must now anger Ethiopian leaders who were praised and

¹²I have analyzed this report and reproduced its text in *Ethiopia: Crisis of a Marxist Economy (Analysis and Text of a Soviet Report)*, The RAND Corporation, R-3677-USDP, April 1989.

¹³E.g., a Moscow radio broadcast of March 30, 1989, following an unpublicized visit to Moscow by Mengistu a few days before, stated, *inter alia*: "Although the [Ethiopian] government spends annually the greater part of the state budget on [the war in the north], there is no end to it in sight. The war in Eritrea has already lasted 28 years, in Tigre 14, and if outside help to the warring sides continues it may last forever. So the question naturally arises as to whether it would not be more sensible to devote [effort to] urgent searches for a mutually acceptable peaceful resolution instead of extending mobilization. This would save the lives of thousands of Ethiopians and resources now going toward the war could be directed toward economic and social development. Appropriate and mutually acceptable formulations for autonomy or a federation would preserve the territorial integrity of the country which at the moment has to be done by force of arms. It seems that Ethiopia would only gain from this."

indulged for years by the same USSR which now chides them for their failures.

To return to the original question: Is the myth of Soviet masterminding of the Ethiopian Revolution and subsequent management of the Derg and the WPE tenable? A careful analysis of known Soviet actions in Ethiopia and regime responses (even though we could benefit from a great deal more firsthand information) does not support it. The rhetorical record from 1974 onward provides a strong basis for believing that Mengistu and his immediate entourage were far more eager for a close Soviet relationship than Moscow was to enter into one. There may also have been substantial differences of opinion among Soviets. Information provided by the late Getachew Kibret, who served in a key position in the foreign ministry in Addis Ababa during the early period of the Revolution (and who defected in 1986 as Ambassador to France), provides strong substantiation for the hypothesis that uncertainties (or disagreements) among the Russians over how to maintain Soviet equities in Somalia led them to compromise and improvise in respect to Ethiopia, but always with the aim of extending their influence and leverage on the entire Horn.¹⁴

Developments in Ethiopia during the years 1975-1977 are difficult to explain unless one postulates the likelihood that different elements in the Soviet mission were supporting conflicting political factions, perhaps implementing a multitrack policy devised in Moscow, perhaps free-wheeling locally. Soviet behavior during the critical months August-November 1977 justifies the hypothesis that officials in Moscow as well as in Addis Ababa and Mogadishu may have been advocating conflicting solutions for coping with the crisis the Somali invasion provoked. Until a very late stage Moscow tried to preserve equities in Somalia and at the same time shape and exploit Ethiopian developments to its advantage.

Events in 1978--the Negede Gobeze affair and expulsion of both the Cuban and Soviet ambassadors--are evidence of sharp disagreements among the Soviets (and perhaps the Cubans) over the extent to which it was

¹⁴As yet unpublished manuscript and record of interviews in possession of the author.

desirable to embrace Mengistu personally and may also reflect disagreements over Eritrea. We know the formation of a communist-type party remained a difficult issue for several years.¹⁵

Many of these unresolved questions and unexplained developments must be fundamental to understanding Ethiopian revolutionary politics and the Soviet relationship to them. They have attracted too little systematic research. The myth of a Soviet master plan for Ethiopia becomes irrelevant if we focus on the far more serious and practical questions of how the two parties--and subsidiary actors such as Castro and the South Yemenis and perhaps the Chinese--actually interacted. Is it too much to hope that a few Soviet scholars might be inspired by *glasnost* to probe into these questions?

Myth No. 6: The Derg was driven into the arms of the Russians by the hostility of the United States.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Somalia, Donald K. Petterson, disposed of this myth in a brief but authoritative study published in 1986.¹⁶ David Korn, charge d'affaires of the American Embassy in Addis Ababa during the years 1982-1985, provides a great deal of additional evidence and analysis in his 1986 book.¹⁷ I have addressed this myth in several articles and monographs, citing statistics relating to military and economic aid.¹⁸

¹⁵For an early assessment of this problem see my "Communism and Ethiopia," *Problems of Communism*, May-June 1981.

¹⁶"Ethiopia Abandoned? An American Perspective," *International Affairs*, London, 62/4, 1986.

¹⁷*Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union*, Croom-Helm, London, 1986 (distributed in the United States by Southern Illinois University Press).

¹⁸E.g., in "Arming the Horn 1960-1980--Military Expenditures, Arms Imports and Military Aid in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Sudan with Statistics on Economic Growth and Governmental Expenditures," published in draft as International Security Studies Working Paper No. 43, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 1982, and in final form in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*, Addis Ababa, Lund, Sweden, and East Lansing, Mich., 1984.

This myth has been largely discredited abroad and is repeated less often now in Addis Ababa than it used to be a few years ago when Derg spokesmen, adopting a stance of hurt innocence, had some success in persuading well-intentioned but ill-informed and sometimes highly placed visitors that they had been forced to "choose" Soviet communism because the United States had rejected them.¹⁹ Let me cite a few basic facts and statements by Mengistu that seem to me to confront anyone who tries to advance this myth with an insuperable problem.

By the end of 1974, following the killing of General Aman Andom and 59 former high officials, Ethiopian media, already under close Derg supervision, began to reflect hostility toward the United States. In early 1975 a Derg group which included three of Mengistu's closest associates--Fikre-Selassie Wogderes, Addis Tedla, and Legesse Asfaw--went to the Soviet Union for political education. By 1976 large numbers of Ethiopians had been sent to Eastern Europe and the USSR for various kinds of training; delegations of all kinds were exchanged frequently and Ethiopian media were as filled with praise of the Soviets and vilification of the United States as those of a full-fledged Soviet satellite.

Following the February 3, 1977, Derg shoot-out in which Head of State General Teferi Banti was killed and from which Mengistu finally emerged as Derg Chairman, he gave an interview to a Cuban journalist, Miguel Roa. Roa provided a lead: "The Ethiopian Government has accused the USA and the CIA in regard to what happened on February 3..." to which Mengistu immediately replied:

I confirm it. I cite in this regard the so-called Spencer report presented by the CIA to the American Congress after the fall of the Emperor in which it is recommended that the U.S. should maintain with Ethiopia the same close ties that existed with the earlier fascist and feudal regime. All in order to control the situation and neutralize the revolutionary trend

¹⁹A remarkable example is an article by Cardinal (then Archbishop) John J. O'Connor after his return from a famine mission in Ethiopia, "O'Connor in Ethiopia: His Own Story," *New York Post*, February 15, 1985.

that was making progress. To put this plan into operation, the Americans chose two courses. On the one hand, they encourage foreign support for the Eritrean separatists fighting against us. At the same time they support the counterrevolutionary forces, either in the capital to create an atmosphere propitious for a coup, or in the northern provinces where the old aristocracy sends armed bands to shoot soldier and peasant. The wave of political assassinations which has recently developed is also part of this strategy.²⁰

This style of thinking is worthy of Joseph Stalin at his most paranoid. Whether Mengistu actually believed what he told Roa about the origin of the Derg opposition he had just eliminated in a palace bloodbath we may never know. It is possible his imagination had been stoked with disinformation fed him directly or indirectly by the Russians.

When the new Chairman and senior Derg members arrived in Moscow in the first week of May 1977, they were welcomed at the airport by General Sokolov, First Deputy Minister of Defense, and General Yepishev, Chief of the Main Political Directorate of the Soviet Armed Forces. A glittering array of senior Soviet officials of the time participated in the talks which followed. At a formal dinner President Podgorny praised Mengistu warmly but avoided clear political endorsement of the Derg and made no negative comments about the United States. Mengistu, however, flush with satisfaction at his public reception in the Kremlin, replied in fulsome Marxist-Leninist jargon and denounced all groups opposing him: "The guardian, coordinator and leader of these groups," he concluded, "is the sworn enemy of oppressed peoples--imperialism, especially American imperialism."²¹

It is difficult to find in declarations such as these even a grain of evidence to support the contention that Mengistu was by then (if, indeed, he ever had been) interested in maintaining a close relationship with the United States. His characterization of John Spencer's statement (given at the August 1976 Senate hearings) in the Roa

²⁰Cited from *La Repubblica* in Rome, March 4, 1977.

²¹Cited from cable from American Embassy Moscow #6260 to Secretary of State, May 5, 1977 (declassified 8/12/81).

interview is, in fact, a remarkable example of the lengths to which Mengistu was willing to go to twist expressions of American goodwill toward Ethiopia into evidence of evil intentions. The speech in Moscow, printed in *Pravda* on May 5, 1977, leaves little doubt that the Roa interview revealed Mengistu's true feelings. These declarations were made seven and four months, respectively, *before* the time when, according to the myth under discussion here, Ethiopia suffered the "shock of rejection in its hour of need--Somali invasion"--by the United States.

Myth No. 7: The United States encouraged Somalia to attack Ethiopia in the summer of 1977.

This has been a favorite myth ever since President Carter, after repeated requests from Somali Ambassador Ahmad Addou, agreed to receive him in the Oval Office on June 17, 1977. Addou brought Carter an urgent message in which Somali President Siad Barre claimed to have knowledge that Ethiopia, with Soviet backing, was preparing to invade Somalia. Would the United States provide immediate military aid?

Reliable U.S. intelligence indicated that reality was exactly the opposite of what Siad alleged. Fully briefed on this intelligence, President Carter replied that if Somalia were actually attacked the United States would be sympathetic and would consider defensive aid but that our information did not substantiate the Somali president's fears. It appears probable that Addou reported this meeting to Mogadishu in much more positive terms than President Carter's response justified. Whatever the Soviets may have told him, Siad had already committed himself to an enormous gamble and was eager to believe that he had inveigled a naive American president into a commitment.

Meanwhile a self-appointed private "emissary," Dr. Kevin Cahill, had been urging military support for Siad through the White House Domestic Staff (always avoiding the normal National Security Council channel) and appears to have encouraged Siad in expectations of U.S. backing. Nothing Dr. Cahill did or said represented U.S. presidential judgment.

By early July 1977, U.S. intelligence sources were providing daily evidence that Somalia had undertaken a full-scale invasion of Ethiopia. Since Ethiopia had broken off its military assistance relationship with the United States a few weeks before and expelled all military-related elements (as well as USIS) from the U.S. mission in Addis Ababa and since Ethiopia had not asked for U.S. assistance in repelling the Somali invasion, President Carter adopted a policy of aiding neither combatant.

This, in its essentials, is the story of U.S. involvement with Somalia as it began its invasion of Ethiopia in the summer of 1977.²² There is no basis for the myth of U.S. encouragement of the Somali attack. The Soviet Union still had over 4000 advisers in Somalia, serving down to the battalion level in the Somali military forces and in the Somali security services as well, when the attack on Ethiopia was planned, prepared, and launched. What did all these Soviet advisers know? What did they tell their Somali counterparts? What did they report to Moscow? What were they telling the Soviet Embassy in Addis Ababa? These, rather than anything that happened in Washington, are the most important unanswered questions about the decisive developments of the summer of 1977.

Myth No. 8: The United States desired exacerbation of the insurgency in Eritrea from 1974 onward and encouraged Sudan and conservative Arab governments to provide financial and material support for all Eritrean factions. Submyth: The United States has continued to provide clandestine financial and material support to the EPLF since it emerged predominant.

The United States has never altered its "Eritrean Policy" since it began to have one in the late 1940s, and all arrangements relating to it have been a matter of public record. The United States has always

²²As National Security Council Staff Officer in charge of Horn of Africa Affairs, I was a direct participant in this sequence of events (including the June 17, 1977, presidential meeting). I hope, when appropriate documents are declassified, to publish a detailed account of these and other related developments.

avored the reintegration of Eritrea with the Ethiopian state with allowance for special features of Eritrea's situation. From 1967 onward, as insurgency in Eritrea intensified thanks to radical Arab, Soviet-proxy (including Cuban), and Chinese communist support, the United States made no compromises or adjustments in its long-established position on Eritrea. During the entire period of American presence in Eritrea, rebel factions generally refrained from attacking U.S. installations or harassing Americans living in Eritrea. There was no bargain with them, however. The decision to gradually reduce U.S. forces at Kagnew Station and to withdraw by 1978 was taken in 1971 and was based exclusively on forthcoming technical developments which would make Kagnew's communications facilities redundant.

No change in U.S. policy or plans occurred after 1974. The United States regretted both the Derg's decision to escalate violence in Eritrea and the EPLF's uncompromising stance. The United States provided neither aid nor encouragement to any Eritrean faction as relations with the revolutionary regime worsened. Eritrean rebels, especially the EPLF, appear to have been primarily dependent on Soviet-friendly sources for support until the Soviets reversed their position in 1977.

David Aaron assured Chairman Mengistu in February 1978 on behalf of President Carter that the United States intended to continue to support Ethiopia's territorial integrity unconditionally and reminded him that those he currently considered his friends were until recently the main supporters of groups who were challenging that integrity.²³ This same position was clear, and has continued to be made clear, repeatedly, to U.S.-friendly governments which from 1978 onward shifted to a policy of qualified support to the Eritrean and other insurgent movements in Ethiopia.²⁴

²³I was a member of the David Aaron mission and participated in talks with Mengistu and other senior Ethiopian officials of that time.

²⁴The Moose mission (see p. 19, below) to Somalia in March 1978 stopped overnight in Jeddah for consultation with the Saudis on Horn problems and future strategy en route back to the United States. Senior Saudi officials maintained that they were providing support to the Eritreans only to harass Mengistu's regime. If the pro-Soviet regime in Ethiopia were replaced by a neutral or pro-Western one, they said they would revert to their previous policy favoring Ethiopian territorial

No body of mythology about Eritrea is more comprehensive and imaginative than a book which appeared in 1986, authored by Tesfatsion Medhanie and printed in the United States for an obscure Dutch publisher.²⁵ Whatever its genesis, it has most of the characteristics of a classic Soviet disinformation product, an impression enhanced by the fact that it was being distributed by the Soviet Embassy in Addis Ababa in 1987. It is dedicated to the memory of the "ELF's fallen heroes" and seems to anticipate the "Northern, Muslim strategy" which the PDRE has attempted to implement during 1988 and 1989. It alleges that the EPLF is the creation of the United States. If this were the case, why, *inter alia*, have so many journalists and writers been encouraged and abetted by the EPLF in efforts to convince Western governments and publics to support EPLF aspirations for an independent Eritrean state?²⁶

Myth No. 9: Jimmy Carter--wittingly or ignorantly--provoked a rupture with Ethiopia by overdramatizing human rights concerns in the weeks immediately following his taking office.

Aficionados of *realpolitik* were much more critical of President Carter's espousal of human rights a decade ago than anyone is now when both the Soviet Union and China provide daily evidence of the strength of this concept. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has recently noted,

integrity, for they did not feel that an independent Eritrea would be a stabilizing factor in the region. There is no reason to believe they have ever abandoned this judgment.

²⁵*Eritrea, Dynamics of a National Question*, B. F. Gruener, Amsterdam, 1986.

²⁶An early work of this genre, Richard Sherman's *Eritrea, the Unfinished Revolution*, Praeger, New York, 1980, has been followed by a dozen or more, of which one of the most recent is Robert Kaplan, *Surrender or Starve: The Wars behind the Famine*, Westview, Boulder, Colo., 1988. The EPLF must be credited with public relations skill, for its efforts have also produced an uncountable and continuing spate of newspaper and magazine articles.

Human rights is the single most magnetic political idea of the contemporary time. Its evocation by the West has already placed all Communist regimes on the defensive. Its appeal is responsive to the emergence of increasingly literate and politically conscious masses who can no longer be so easily isolated and indoctrinated....²⁷

By early 1977, when President Carter expressed his concern about human rights in Ethiopia (where unprecedented and daily violence perpetrated by both the Derg and its opponents had already aroused world opinion), the U.S. Congress had long since established a requirement that the Executive Branch prepare an annual worldwide assessment of human rights. The assessment submitted in February 1977 had been drafted under the Ford Administration in the fall of 1976 following Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearings on Ethiopia in August of the same year. No significant changes in the section dealing with Ethiopia were made after President Carter took office. The President was neither original nor unique in his concern about human rights violations in revolutionary Ethiopia. It takes a peculiarly limited mentality to accept the notion that Chairman Mengistu's actions restricting the U.S. relationship in subsequent weeks were actually provoked by outrage over the Carter Administration's criticism. Circumstantial evidence supports the probability that Mengistu was seeking a convenient opportunity to break off as much of the U.S. relationship as possible to meet Soviet conditions for military aid. The USSR, in response to repeated Derg requests, had finally committed itself to a military assistance program for Ethiopia in December 1976.

Myth No. 10: Following the Somali invasion in the summer of 1977, the United States withheld military aid to give the Somalis an advantage over Ethiopia.

²⁷Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure, the Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, Scribners, New York, 1989, p. 256.

The United States adopted a policy of providing military aid to neither belligerent following the Somali invasion of Ethiopia. This involved no new departure in the case of Somalia, since the United States had never given military assistance to Mogadishu, this being the primary overt preoccupation of the USSR in the Horn of Africa from the mid-1960s onward. In spite of Siad's repeated denials, it was clear to the United States that Somalia had invaded Ethiopia with regular forces and Siad was so informed repeatedly.²⁸

Though the United States had for almost 25 years been Ethiopia's main source of military assistance, Derg requirements, as the Eritrean conflict became progressively exacerbated, came to exceed the capacity of the United States and/or any other Western country by the summer of 1976. With assurance of Soviet aid in his pocket, Mengistu enthusiastically terminated the U.S. relationship in the spring of 1977.²⁹ But initially Soviet aid was very slow in coming. Ethiopia had to fight the first phase of the Somali invasion with U.S. equipment. Northrop F-5E fighter-bombers delivered to Ethiopia in the summer of 1976 were decisive in destroying the Soviet-supplied Somali Air Force. This experience whetted the desire of some elements of the Ethiopian military for resumption of U.S. support during August and September 1977 and strong appeals were made during the visit to Addis Ababa which State Department Country Director for the Horn of Africa (Richard Post) and I as National Security Council representative made to Ethiopia in the second week of September 1977. No official request for resumption of aid was ever made by Mengistu, however, and statements he made at the

²⁸*Inter alia*, during an official visit which the State Department Horn of Africa Country Director and I made to Somalia in early September 1977, at which time Siad still denied that regular Somali troops were participating in operations inside Ethiopia. Siad admitted their presence only when he officially announced their withdrawal in early March 1978.

²⁹Not without serious internal dissension in the Derg, as the bloody shoot-out of the first week of February 1977 demonstrates. Disagreement over the nature of the Soviet relationship appears to have wracked the Derg at least until the execution of Deputy Derg Chairman Atnafu Abate in November of the same year.

time appear to indicate that he preferred to tough out the situation in hope of a major Soviet rescue effort.³⁰ The United States continued to adhere to the position confirmed by President Carter in July 1977, though a few deliveries of items in the pipeline at the time the Derg broke off the military relationship in the spring of 1977 were made in subsequent months.

Myth No. 11: The United States continued to encourage Somali President Siad Barre in guerrilla operations inside Ethiopia after he withdrew Somali regular forces in March 1978.

On the contrary, after Siad withdrew his regular forces from Ethiopia, the White House immediately sent a mission to Mogadishu under the leadership of Richard Moose, Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, to lay the basis for a closer association including, it was hoped, an agreement to supply defensive military assistance in return for permission to use certain military facilities in Somalia.³¹ A prerequisite for such agreement was a firm commitment by Siad that Somalia would neither undertake nor abet renewed guerrilla operations in Ethiopia. David Aaron had assured Mengistu on behalf of President Carter the previous month in Addis Ababa that the United States had no intention of supporting any future Somali aggression against Ethiopia. The Moose mission proved unsuccessful, for Siad would not give the assurances Washington required. For the next two years, Siad clandestinely supported guerrilla operations in Ethiopia through two irredentist "fronts." These activities, which were well known to U.S. intelligence, prevented the implementation of a military assistance/facilities agreement between the United States and Somalia until 1980.³²

³⁰On September 11, 1977, in a meeting with university students, Mengistu stated that "while there are certain members of the Derg who favor renewal of the previous relationship with the U.S., I...do not favor and do not anticipate reestablishment of a military supply relationship with the U.S." Cable from American Embassy Addis Ababa #5408 to Secretary of State, September 16, 1977 (declassified 8/12/81).

³¹I was also a member of this mission.

³²Following the collapse of the Shah's government in Iran, advocates of a "stronger" policy which would ignore Somali incursions

Myth No. 12: That the Great Famine which began in 1984 was caused exclusively by drought and then deliberately exacerbated by Western governments with the aim of embarrassing the Ethiopian revolutionary leadership.

The experience of Kenya with a more severe drought during this same period proves that drought alone need not necessarily lead to famine at all.³³ Research by Ethiopian specialists has demonstrated likewise.³⁴ Dawit Wolde Giorgis has documented in his memoirs the difficulties he had as Relief and Rehabilitation Commissioner getting Mengistu's government, preoccupied with preparations for establishment of its Marxist-Leninist party, to recognize or acknowledge publicly that a famine crisis was building up.³⁵ Drought certainly *contributed* to the famine situation, but a more significant exacerbating factor was the deteriorated military situation in Eritrea and Tigre, the result of years of unsuccessful efforts by the Derg to subdue the disaffected

into Ethiopia and provide military assistance without strings attached periodically expressed themselves both within and outside the U.S. government. There was also minority support in Congress for such an approach but there was never any reason to believe that Congress would have approved military aid without firm guarantees that it would not embroil the United States in a renewed Somali military venture in Ethiopia--even if the Administration had proposed such a course of action, which it did not. Kenya, with which the United States developed close relations during this period, exerted strong pressure against taking any risks with Somalia, for it also felt threatened. Meanwhile, the main thrust of U.S. policy toward Ethiopia was an effort, following the arrival of Ambassador Frederick Chapin in Addis Ababa in July 1978, to settle sources of friction over nationalized U.S. investments with the Derg. The Derg was not forthcoming and Chapin left Addis Ababa in the summer of 1980, frustrated and disappointed.

³³J. M. Cohen and D. B. Lewis, "The Role of Government in Combating Food Shortages: Lessons from Kenya, 1984-85," in Michael Glantz (ed.), *Drought and Hunger in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1986.

³⁴Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, "Northern Shewa and Wello...a Development Strategy for the Problem of Vulnerability to Famine," a paper for the FAO Investment Centre, Addis Ababa, September 1985; Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, *Rural Vulnerability to Famine in Ethiopia, 1958-1977*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1984; Dessalegn Rahmato, *Famine and Survival Strategies--a Case Study from Northeast Ethiopia*, Institute of Development Studies, Addis Ababa University, May 1987.

³⁵*Red Tears*, Red Sea Press, 1988.

populations of northern Ethiopia. The difficulties Mengistu's government placed in the way of Western governments and nongovernmental organizations delivering emergency food and supplies to northern Ethiopia (which recurred in 1987-1988) in themselves give the lie to the regime's contention that the famine crisis was *brought on* by Western reluctance to provide aid. The famine experience has been well-documented by a wide variety of authoritative authors, none of whom supplies any basis for giving credibility to defensive and self-incriminating regime mythology about it.³⁶

CONCLUSION

My purpose has been not simply to expose and discredit these myths, but to challenge both foreign and Ethiopian scholars to analyze the country's prerevolutionary history and revolutionary experience in greater depth, with more insight and objectivity.

It is only by doing this that some of the damage which Marxism-Leninism has done to Ethiopia can be repaired and the groundwork laid for a brighter future for the country. In light of the revolution which is now going on in all phases of life in the Soviet Union--and not the least in historiography--it is to be hoped that Soviet scholars will also find opportunities to participate in this process.

³⁶E.g., Chapter 7 in David Korn, op. cit.